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On darkened days and sleepless nights

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Official organ of the Melbourne Branch of the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History

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IN THIS EDITION:

- Annual General Meeting, p. 1
- 40th Anniversary of the Whitlam Government, p. 1
- The People's Story Museum, by Peter Love, pp. 2-3
- Labour and ANZAC Conference, by Phillip Deery, p. 3
- John Ellis Memoirs, by Peter Love, p. 3
- Labour History and Sam Merrifield, p. 3
- Joe Owens, by Verity Burgmann, p. 4

- DLP members in Victorian Parliament, by Ainsely Simons, pp. 4-5
- *I'll Be There*, Victorian Trade Union Choir Special Event, p. 5
- Wisconsin Rising, p. 6
- On Darkened Days and Sleepless Nights, by Rowan Cahill, p. 6
- Obituaries: Norm Clapton, Dom Mintoff & Peter Nolan, by Brian Smiddy, p. 7
- In Davitt's footsteps along the Murray, by Val Noone, pp. 7-11
- Section Overboard, by Brian Costar, pp. 11-12
- Notes, correspondence, branch news and contact details, p. 12

NOTICE OF AGM

MELBOURNE BRANCH, ASSLH

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Thursday 13 December at 5.30pm

Melbourne Trades Hall
Evatt Room

Agenda

Reports: President, Secretary,
Treasurer.

Election of Office Bearers and General
Business.

*Please also note that your 2013
membership renewal is now due.*

WHITLAM GOVERNMENT'S 40TH BIRTHDAY

The Melbourne ASSLH, New International Bookshop and Search Foundation have combined to bring you two events to celebrate the election of the Whitlam Government on 2 December 1972.

Forum on the Significance of the Whitlam Government
Friday 30 November, 5.30 for 7.00pm
Melbourne Conference Centre

(Opposite the State Library. Entrance at side of Church)
5.30 pm for drinks, nibbles & comradely catch-ups
followed by 7.00 pm for speakers and open forum.

Historians Jenny Hocking and Paul Strangio will join Whitlam Government Minister Moss Cass to open discussion, with Louise Connor in the Chair.



Source: NAA

Whitlam Government 40th Birthday Party
Sunday 2 December, 4.00pm
Melbourne Trades Hall

Food, drink, historical film clips, music and comradely jollifications. Add a little historical verisimilitude to the occasion by wearing your (or your parents' or grand-parents') 1970s clothes, badges, etc. We look forward to seeing you at either or both events.

The Victorian Trade Union Choir presents 'I'll be there: songs and stories of solidarity'. Two special performances only. 8pm on Friday 16 and Saturday 17 November 2012. See p. 5 for details.

Wisconsin Uprising



Chris White has written a review around chapter excerpts of Michael D. Yates (ed.), *Wisconsin Uprising: Labor Fights Back* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2012). It was published in *Online Opinion*. Below are links to the review and to Monthly Review Press.

<http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=14211&page=0>

<http://monthlyreview.org/press/books/pb2808/>

On Darkened Days and Sleepless Nights

By Rowan Cahill

Recently, two separate 'events' intertwined in my mind. Last week I visited the blockade of a coal seam/coal gas exploration site, out in the rural backblocks of the Southern Highlands in NSW. It was Day 10 of a 24-hour blockade: a reception tent cum kitchen, a caravan for sleeping, a few tractors, horse floats, huge rolls of hay, and an assortment of determined townies and farmers. They were, and are, opposing coal seam gas exploration, and the controversial and increasing scientifically and environmentally condemned practice of 'fracking', the depletion of water qualities, possible increased salination, possible damage to aquifers. They are up against the law which permits speculative exploration over and above property rights; huge corporate wealth with bottomless overseas capital reserves; politicians of all hues who seem to bend to the rustle of money; smiling corporate front people with cut-and-paste smiles and cut-and-paste PR and expert 'wouldn't-hurt-a-fly-trust-me' smarm and conviction who could charm their ways past St. Peter; and floods of expensive propaganda in the local media....And I'd just read an essay in the New York Review of Books about Pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906-1945), the anti-Nazi Lutheran theologian who went with his faith into the realms of espionage, subterfuge, and complicity in assassination, and his little known brother-in-law accomplice, lawyer Hans von Dohnanyi (1902-1945), both executed by the Nazi-state. Bonhoeffer has long interested me, having been first brought to my attention as an undergraduate in the 1960s by one of my teachers, the historian and sociologist (Professor) Ernst Bramstedt, then teaching at Sydney University. Dohnanyi is new to me.



Bonhoeffer, July 1939

As I said, two strands intertwined. What is the point, I asked myself rhetorically, of holding out against great wealth, great power, great injustices, in the name of principles, for what is right, when the end is almost

the certainty of getting rolled, of sticking to your guns and ending up like Bonhoeffer and Dohnanyi in the hangman's noose, real or metaphorical? Granted, Bonhoeffer 'survives' today, well known because of his actions and his stand; the Nazi machine could not delete him from history as he had significant international theological and intellectual clout and reputation before he took his stand. But that does not apply to the coal seam blockaders, nor to the locals, for example, in New Guinea, in Africa, in the Amazon region, variously struggling to protect their habitats and livelihoods from the depredations of logging, mining, and oil operations, or to countless others all over the world variously opposing those who would otherwise walk over them in the name of the State, corporate gains, austerity, or whatever....

While protest actions and dissenting activities do succeed, particularly when they are part of social movements or linked with mass movements and class struggles, and let us not be deceived by the silences of history, over time there have been victories aplenty, like the grains of sand on a beach, too numerous to count; however, the point is that protest actions, acts of resistance, of saying No, do not require success to be validated; they are their own validation. Ideally there is a receptive and sympathetic audience, ideally a mass movement of some kind, but in the end the No-saying boils down to an individual act, irrespective of the context; it is something only the individual can do, being at core an individual ethical, moral, political response to a circumstance/situation.

And it counts, no matter the audience, no matter the chance of success. Every declaration of No, every act of resistance is a hurdle for those who seek and prefer an acquiescent roll-over-me world, a level playing field in which there is no opposition. It is the act of resistance that is crucial, not necessarily its success or otherwise. Resistance and the saying of No is what darkens the days and haunts the nights of those who envisage the well-tended compliance of acquiescent playing fields. And the act of saying No, the act of resistance, is what frustrates and prevents the realisation of those playing fields, both now and in the future.

For radical historians, one of their tasks is to keep knowledge of the dissenters, the resisters, the No-sayers, alive and accessible. Another, is to add the lives and actions and struggles and contexts of the many unknown and nameless ones who have variously struggled against wealth and power for a voice and agency in history, to those that are known. In doing so, these lives and actions can be political and moral compass points for the present and the future, and like Bonhoeffer, offer profound challenges to what it means to live meaningfully and well.

Rowan Cahill, 21 October 2012. Originally posted on *Radical Ruminations*, a blog that is written by Terry Irving and Rowan Cahill. <http://radicalsydney.blogspot.com.au/p/radical-ruminations.html>